

THE JEWS OF EXETER – AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY

Helen Fry

In 2013 Exeter Synagogue reached an historic landmark with the celebration of its 250th anniversary. As the second oldest extant synagogue outside London it has a rich history that stretches back to the early 18th century. Evidence exists too for a much older Medieval worshipping Jewish community in Exeter, before their expulsion from England in 1290.

By the mid-eighteenth century Exeter possessed a viable Jewish community along with Plymouth, Falmouth and Penzance in the South West, and looked to the future. During this period the four communities all acquired a burial ground and constructed their own purpose-built synagogue. In Plymouth the synagogue is still in use as a place of worship, built a year before Exeter in 1762, and it also has two burial grounds.

The Jews of Exeter is the first fully illustrated history on this subject. It opens a window on to Exeter's Jewish history throughout the centuries: from periods of birth and growth to decline and revival. It focuses on the personalities and figures who shaped the community and who kept the beautiful Georgian synagogue going through difficult eras as well as times of expansion and renewal. Exeter's gem of a purpose-built synagogue which dates to 1763 is now a Grade II listed building and is hugely significant in terms of Britain's wider heritage. The old Jewish burial ground in Magdalen Street on the edge of Bull Meadow was acquired in 1757, and included in this book for the first time is a full list of those buried in the two Exeter Jewish cemeteries, thus providing important information both for genealogists and family historians.

Over a period of two and a half centuries the Jews of Exeter have contributed significantly to the wider Devon and Exeter community, including aspects of commerce, business, the arts, politics and civic life. This book will highlight the importance of preserving this unique history and heritage for posterity.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

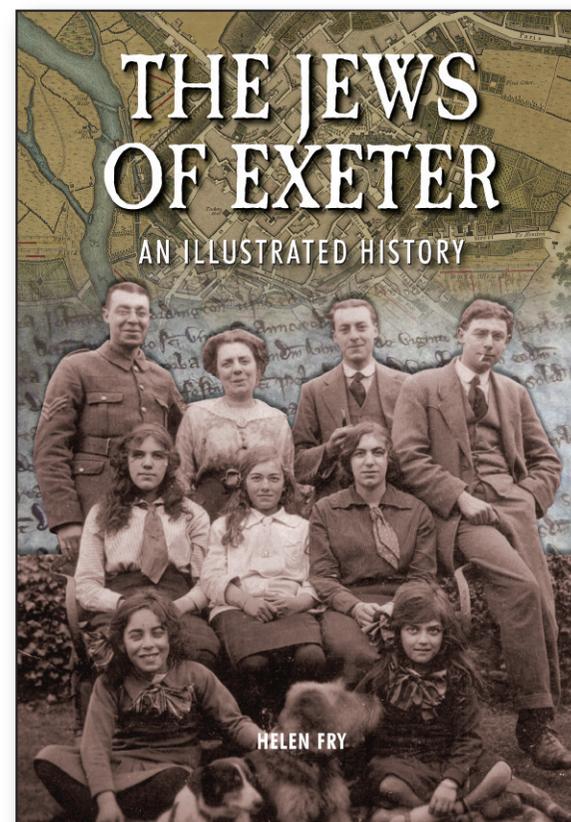
Helen Fry has written widely on the history of Jewish communities with particular reference to the Jews of Devon and Cornwall. This includes books entitled *Jews in North Devon during the Second World War*; and *The Lost Jews of Cornwall* (edited). She has also written over a dozen books about the refugees from Nazism who fought for Britain in WWII, including Churchill's German Army, as well as a biography of Sigmund Freud and his family entitled *Freud's War*. Her book *Music & Men* covers the life of concert pianist Harriet Cohen.

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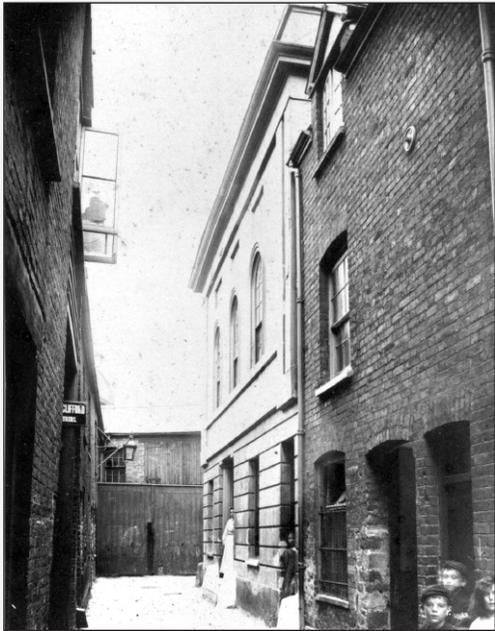


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Bill Boam at the bimah

Left: Exeter synagogue exterior, c.1910, facing a mattress factory. To the right of the synagogue is a building that housed the minister and religion school

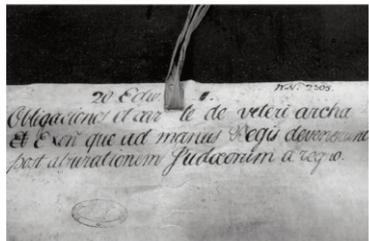


Isaac Silverstone and family



Medieval manuscript of transactions by Jews in Exeter

Medieval manuscript from the Exeter Assize, period of Edward I



CHAPTER 1 THE JEWS OF MEDIEVAL EXETER

THE FIRST JEWS to settle in England came with William the Conqueror in 1066. Although there may have been itinerant Jews living in Britain since Roman times there was no organised community or settlement until the Norman period. William the Conqueror brought Jews with him from France to England, although there is no evidence of any Jewish presence in Exeter during his reign. Precisely when Jews arrived in the city is not recorded. The earliest evidence for Jews living in Exeter dates to 1177 when a law was passed which granted them a country beyond the city walls. Before then, corpses had to be excreted in London for burial.¹ Historian Alexander Jaskas writes that in the reign of Henry II: 'The liberty of burial in Exeter was at this time given to the Jews, many of whom were then resident therein'.² There is no longer a precise reference to the location of the burial ground, but it is safe to assume that Jews were already established in the city well before 1177 because they would not have been granted a burial ground so immediately after arrival in the city. Their own burial ground was only necessary when the community was well-established. The worshiping Jewish community of Medieval Exeter once had its own synagogue although, like the burial ground, its precise location is now unknown. The community appointed a Rabbi and lay leaders to conduct regular services.

The first surviving financial transaction for Jewish business in the city dates to 1183. Official documents pertaining to the Jews in Medieval Exeter have survived in several archives: the British Museum,³ Exeter Cathedral archives, Royal Archives at Windsor and the Public Record Office in London.⁴ During this period there was no parliamentary administration and so England's Jews became the direct property of the Crown. It was a mixed blessing. On the one hand they were useful to the King's prerogative, on the other they were useful to him because periodically he could demand money from them to fill the empty Royal coffers. The money of the King's Jewish subjects was often used to fund wars or campaigns, including the Crusades. Jews had no choice but to engage with Royal demands if they were to live freely and enjoy the King's protection.



From the Exeter Assize

In spite of the anti-Jewish teaching of the Church, there was a degree of religious tolerance for Jews living in England during the Conqueror's reign. According to protection under the Crown, they enjoyed freedom to practice their religion and were permitted to set up their own Law Court, or Beth Din, to decide on matters of religion. A Beth Din was established in Exeter but its use entailed a heavy levy on the Royal Exchequer, necessitating its conversion only in the most serious of legal cases. In carrying out their transactions, Jews were allowed to wear an amulet on their heads (and at the law rather than the customary Christian Bible which included the New Testament). However, their religious intolerance did not extend to freedom of employment. According to Canon Law (the law of the Church) and civil law, Jews were restricted to the practice of money-lending, i.e. lending money as a loan and charging interest on it. Usury was an occupation forbidden to Christians. Many of the medieval legal documents which survive today are financial transactions for money-lending to Christians by Jews, including the Crusades. Jews had no choice but to engage with Royal demands if they were to live freely and enjoy the King's protection.

¹ Jaskas, *The Jews of Anglo-Saxon England*.
² Alexander Jaskas, *Civil and Ecclesiastical History of the City of Exeter and its Environs*.
³ Custodian of the Priory of St Nicholas and Lundenow MSS.
⁴ TNA E101, No. 249, 27 as reports upon property, E101, No. 260, 2, gives a list of loans in the Assize.



David Lazarus (1822-1895), standing behind his daughter Caroline and her husband John Hyman and their two eldest children, Catherine and Deborah

Left: Ida Samuels on her wedding day with mother Charlotte, 1918

Example of a double-page spread.